



# **ROMA YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE**

## **CHALLENGES, NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

### ***FOCUS GROUPS WITH YOUNG ROMA***

A report prepared within the Roma Youth Voices project  
2021



# CONTENTS

	Key facts and findings based on the focus group participants' opinions.....	3
<b>1.</b>	<b>Project details and methodology.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>What does civic and political engagement/participation mean for young Roma?.....</b>	<b>7</b>
	Meaning and functions of participation .....	7
	Distinguishing between different forms of participation .....	8
	Roma youth empowerment and agency .....	9
	Manifestations of participation .....	10
<b>3.</b>	<b>The importance of civic and political participation of Roma youth.....</b>	<b>11</b>
	Youth – the future generation .....	11
	Roma young people's potential for community development .....	12
	Senior generations failed to address Roma youth needs .....	13
	Roma youth's potential to decrease antigypsyism .....	14
	Formalizing (Roma) youth participation through legislative frameworks .....	14
<b>4.</b>	<b>Roma youth participation across Europe: country specific issues .....</b>	<b>16</b>
	Bulgaria .....	16
	Hungary .....	17
	Slovakia .....	19
	Spain .....	20
	Romania .....	22
	Kosovo .....	24
	Serbia .....	25
	Albania .....	27
	North Macedonia .....	29
	Montenegro .....	30
	Ukraine .....	30
<b>5.</b>	<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>36</b>
	Annex .....	38

# KEY FACTS AND FINDINGS BASED ON THE FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS' OPINIONS

- Youth participation was considered important because Roma youth see themselves as the generation of the future. The focus group respondents claimed that investment in the youth sector can be justified because young people are more progressive and innovative when compared to current leadership. Roma youth have a much higher potential to decrease systemic racism.
- There is a general lack of knowledge and awareness among Roma youth about Roma activism, opportunities available to them, and youth rights.
- Roma youth's motivation to participate in civic and political life is hindered by their lack of skills, information about how and when to participate, and by everyday life challenges.
- Young Roma are faced with mistrust and skepticism from their communities. Negative attitudes from both the elderly Roma generation and others outside their communities (i.e., non-Roma) towards young Roma discourage Roma youth activism.
- Both Roma and pro-Roma NGOs' leadership and the way they are organized pose significant challenges for Roma youth participation. Most NGOs are not doing enough to reach out to and inform Roma youth about the different opportunities available for their participation.
- Young Roma are not represented in mainstream youth structures because they are not invited or are not recognized, and this results in a perception of Roma youth as occupying a passive role within the mainstream youth movement.
- There is a lack of institutional support for activities initiated by Roma. Mainstream institutions ignore both the problems of Roma and Roma youth. Institutions should reach out to young Roma and support their contribution and active involvement in the design and implementation of different strategies or action plans related to young people and Roma.
- Structural antigypsyism is another important challenge impeding participation of Roma youth on all levels. This is reflected in how local authorities, civil society organizations and policymakers deal with Roma issues, how they perceive the Roma, and in how much they are willing to listen to Roma voices, and to include Roma as equal partners in different actions and measures.



# 1. PROJECT DETAILS AND METHODOLOGY

This report is a result of the work of a number of organizations involved in the Roma Youth Voices Project led by the Phiren Amenca International Network between 2019 and 2020.<sup>1</sup> Through its work Phiren Amenca interacts with a great number of young Roma from all over Europe. The organization works with Roma youth of diverse academic backgrounds, language skills and international experiences but also with young Roma from segregated and impoverished areas, who, as participants in the organization's activities, often leave their city or country for the first time. In order to better shape European projects and institutional agendas to respond to the importance of Roma youth participation, Phiren Amenca conducted a series of studies exploring the different challenges that Roma youth face, their needs opportunities for participation.<sup>2</sup>

The Roma Youth Voices project was initiated in 2018 by Phiren Amenca International Network, ternYpe Roma Youth Network and their partners whose aim is to invest into grassroots social movements of Roma and non-Roma youth. The objectives of the project were to find ways to achieve equality, social justice, solidarity and respect between Roma and non-Roma, and to take actions against stereotypes targeting Roma, against antigypsyism<sup>3</sup>, and against racism. Among its main activities, the project focused on raising awareness of and campaigning for respect, dialogue and solidarity between Roma and non-Roma; capacity-building of Roma youth organizations on local and national level; raising voices, mobilization and participation of Roma youth in policy-making processes; and strengthening the role of young people and youth organizations in the context of national and European policies targeted at Roma and non-Roma youth.

The project envisioned that Roma youth (and their organizations) would become empowered to advocate for their own needs, contribute to challenging stereotypes and racism (through campaigns, dialogue between Roma and non-Roma, civil society alliances for solidarity and defense of human rights) and become aware of existing European and national policy initiatives related to Roma. Last but not least, the project aimed to (1) enhance the recognition of Roma youth organizations by decision-makers and civil society as agents of change and partners for Roma inclusion; and at the same time, to (2) raise awareness about the needs, challenges and potentials of Roma youth.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details about the project see the Project page at: [https://phirenamenca.eu/category/projects/roma\\_youth\\_voices/](https://phirenamenca.eu/category/projects/roma_youth_voices/)

<sup>2</sup> Position Paper of the Roma Youth Networks on the Post-2020 EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies

<sup>3</sup> Antigypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination is a manifestation of individual expressions and acts as well as institutional policies and practices of marginalization, exclusion, physical violence, devaluation of Roma cultures and lifestyles, and hate speech directed at Roma as well as other individuals and groups perceived, stigmatized, or persecuted during the Nazi era, and still today, as "Gypsies." This leads to the treatment of Roma as an alleged alien group and associates Roma with a series of pejorative stereotypes and distorted images that represent a specific form of racism (IHRA Working definition of Antigypsyism 2020).

This report presents the results of focus groups conducted in the following countries by Phiren Amenca and their partners:

**EU countries:**

- Romania: 6 participants, focus group conducted by E-Romnja<sup>4</sup>
- Bulgaria: 7 participants, focus group conducted by Amalipe<sup>5</sup>
- Spain: 5 participants, focus group conducted by FAGiC<sup>6</sup>
- Hungary: 5 participants, focus group conducted by RGDTS-Phiren Amenca<sup>7</sup>
- Slovakia: 5 participants, focus group conducted by Association of Young Roma<sup>8</sup>

**Non-EU countries:**

- Kosovo: 7 participants, focus group conducted by an informal Roma youth group
- Albania: 8 participants, focus group conducted by Roma Active Albania<sup>9</sup>
- Serbia: 6 participants, focus group conducted by Roma Youth Association, SRB<sup>10</sup>
- North Macedonia: 5 participants, focus group conducted by Sumnal<sup>11</sup>
- Montenegro: 7 participants, focus group conducted by Phiren Amenca, MNE<sup>12</sup>
- Ukraine: 7 participants, focus group conducted by ARCA<sup>13</sup>

This section presented the project details and the research methodology for this focus group report. The next section of this report starts with a short discussion on the **different understandings of participation**, as expressed by Roma youth. The analysis includes selected views which reflect the views of the focus group participants from each country.

The third section focuses on the **importance of Roma youth participation**. Through the focus groups, Roma youth brought new insights to the importance of youth and Roma youth’s civic and political engagement. This section discusses the following themes: Roma youth as the generation of the future; Roma youth’s potential for community development; the generational shift and a failure in addressing Rom a youth’s needs; Roma youth’s potential to decrease antigypsyism and Roma youth’s opinion of formalizing Roma youth participation through legislative frameworks.

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<sup>4</sup> See more at: <https://e-romnja.ro/>

<sup>5</sup> See more at: <https://amalipe.bg/>

<sup>6</sup> See more at: <http://www.fagic.org/>

<sup>7</sup> See more at: <https://phirenamenca.eu/>

<sup>8</sup> See more at: <http://www.youngroma.sk/>

<sup>9</sup> See more at: <https://raa.al/>

<sup>10</sup> See more at: <https://www.facebook.com/Udru%C5%BEenje-mladih-Roma-Srbije-954743411240219/>

<sup>11</sup> See more at: <https://sumnal.mk/en/>

<sup>12</sup> See more at: <http://phirenamenca.me/>

<sup>13</sup> See more at: <https://www.facebook.com/YNGO.ARCA>

The report continues with presenting respondents detailed and selected views regarding their analysis of their country's context, with regards to Roma youth participation. It distinguishes between European Union Member States and non-EU countries. The respondents' analysis follows the main themes presented in the Annex: every country analysis starts with an elaboration on the socio-demographics of the respondents and their experiences with Roma activism; it continues with a set of questions that address the needs and challenges of Roma youth when it comes to participation.

Finally, based on the results and conclusions from the focus groups the report puts forward a **set of recommendations aimed at enhancing the situation of Roma youth and their capacity for participation.**

## 2. WHAT DOES CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT/PARTICIPATION MEAN FOR YOUNG ROMA?

In the other two reports of this research project<sup>14</sup> there has been a thorough discussion about (1) what participation means from an academic perspective as it pertains to Roma, (2) what international, European and national youth and minority participation standards and frameworks exist, (3) the importance of Roma youth participation. This report continues to provide a better understanding of civic and political engagement and participation as perceived by Roma youth.

Before proceeding further, it is worth devoting sometime some space defining what activism means. For example, most people use ‘activist’ to designate ‘a person who believes strongly in political or social change and takes part in activities such as public protests to try to make this happen’ (from Cambridge Dictionary) but it can also mean someone who believes in social change. In general usage however, ‘activist’ is not the same as a volunteer for an NGO. Throughout this report, the term activist is used to refer also to volunteers and NGO workers.

Based on the focus groups conducted, four main themes of discussion emerged around the meaning of participation. The first theme refers to the meaning and functions attributed to participation as perceived by young Roma people. The second theme distinguishes between different forms of participation. In the third theme respondents expressed how the idea of participation fosters Roma youth empowerment and agency with regards to Roma and youth issues. The last theme discusses how Roma youth participation is manifested in practice.

### MEANING AND FUNCTIONS OF PARTICIPATION

For some members of the Slovak focus group, participation means knowing and understanding one’s rights (Daniel, 20 years old, psychology student), influencing the things that are of concern to oneself (Tomas, 20 years old, student and youth activist), or representation in public office and public institutions (Renata, 30 years old, NGO director). Ivan, a 29-year-old NGO leader, pictures participation as a group of people trying to make their voice heard.

For the majority of the Spanish group, as Israel (26 years old, History student) highlighted, participation means to have a voice, to have representation in the decision-making process so that one’s voice is taken into account. For Paco (27 years old, activist and political science student) participation is the prerequisite for one’s voice to have an echo: ***“We have to participate if we want our ideas to be heard in the political sphere”*** says Paco. Similarly, for Ángel (23 years old, NGO worker) participation is to take action, to invest time in an activity or event and reach out to other potential participants.

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<sup>14</sup> See more at: [https://phirenamenca.eu/category/projects/roma\\_youth\\_voices/](https://phirenamenca.eu/category/projects/roma_youth_voices/)

For the Romanian participants – the youngest focus group – participation has a double sense: on the one hand, participation is understood as taking part in different activities and projects (Romina, 16 years old, high school student); on the other hand, participation means to take part together with other members of a group in ***“actions that have a specific aim, such as tackling injustices”*** says Ruben (19 years old, high school student).

## DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN DIFFERENT FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

Participants across the targeted countries make clear distinctions between civic, political participation, and participation through movements. For example, Gábor from Hungary (27 years old, social work student) pointed out that even though some young people stay away from formal politics (i.e., party membership) they still participate politically: ***“I do not belong to a party. I participate politically but I do not believe in any party.”*** Alternatively, Gábor chooses to give voice to his opinion, in a small community: ***“As a social work student, I participate by voicing my opinions. I do not agree with the government’s actions in the social sphere, so I am trying to help as a volunteer, trying to mobilize young people, so that they stand up for themselves.”***

Similarly, for Zoli (21 years old, sociology student from Hungary) civic participation means that you volunteer, you help people around you who are in need. Political participation on the other hand, would imply that you stand up, and campaign for the aims you would like to achieve in society.

For others, civic and political participation blend together. Adrienn (26 years old, sociologist from Hungary) states that ***“Civic, social responsibility is equal to solidarity, responsibility for others. It is my civic duty to go and vote. But it is definitely important for me to be able to vote. I always take part in demonstrations if they are in line with my principles. Civic/social responsibility is helping marginalized groups. Any small act and contribution can count as taking responsibility, even [ethical] shopping choices.”***

For some focus group members, participation is reduced to identity politics. For Diana (22 years old student from Ukraine), participation is associated with taking part in the Roma movement. In the absence of a discussion in a general context, Diana would have associated participation with elections, voting, and any other formalities towards the state (i.e., paying taxes). In the context of Roma issues, she believes that there are too many injustices towards the Roma that need to be fixed: ***“I believe that if Roma rights are not violated and have the same access to their rights as any other citizen, the problems of the Roma community may not have been relevant”*** adds Diana, pointing out that participation contributes to tackling Roma collective problems.

# ROMA YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND AGENCY

Several respondents explained how the idea of participation strengthens young Roma people's sense of involvement and agency in Roma and youth issues. For example, Bozhidar, a 19-year-old Bulgarian student stated that besides the international and governmental efforts, Roma should address the basic needs in their communities to improve the situation of Roma.

Based on their personal experiences, participants from Kosovo claimed that civic and political engagement/participation includes awareness raising among Roma to mobilize them on various issues. ***“Civic engagement means that we can bring a change”*** said Visar (23 years old, unemployed). Some of the Kosovar participants believe that through activism and participation the values of the Roma community can be promoted among those who lack knowledge about who the Roma are.

In the Montenegrin group, Dijamant (24 years old, collaborator for NGO Help) pointed out the structural barriers that Roma encounter when it comes to participation in decision-making and public institutions:

***“We have no one in the parliament and where decisions are made. Someone else makes decisions about us and we have no idea what it's about. If we had someone there who would fight for us, that would be a different matter. For example, in the Balkans, most of the Roma have political representation, only we in Montenegro are lagging in this respect. Only the civil sector and non-governmental organizations are influencing policy-making in Montenegro. Without them, who knows where we would have been”.***

Montenegrin respondents tended to agree that there is a need to raise awareness among Roma community members about issues of political representation and participation since they see it as the only way for positive change.

In North Macedonia, Mukades, (18 years old, high school student) points out that Roma agency and empowerment, as the manifestations of participation, are achieved when Roma have equal access to education, social and health care, employment, etc. Without these prerequisites there are few chances for Roma to have representatives in governmental bodies, or as leaders.

Oleg (35 years old, civil servant from the Ukraine) pointed out that it is the responsibility of Roma people to organize collectively and bring new people in the Roma activists' movement to make their voice stronger. He is aware that Roma youth participation in the social and political life of the country or of the region would be beneficial for the Roma community. The crucial step, according to Oleg, is to make sure that the demands of Roma as a collective are communicated to the relevant authorities and governmental agencies.



The points expressed above provide insights into the mechanisms through which Roma can achieve substantial progress when it comes to voicing their concerns and needs. First, there is an emphasis on what Roma can do for themselves in the absence of a coherent participation platform available in the respective countries. Secondly, from the focus groups we can conclude that the work of Roma-led NGOs has compensated to some extent for the lack of Roma formal representation in the respective socio-political contexts. Thirdly, respondents mentioned that structural barriers make it difficult for Roma to access key positions in society. In sum, Roma participants of the focus groups showed a high level of awareness when it comes to the situation of Roma in relation to formal structures of participation.

## MANIFESTATIONS OF PARTICIPATION

Respondents across the targeted countries shared how participation is manifested in practice, as experienced by Roma youth. For most of them, participation means involvement in all matters that affect Roma communities, either through NGOs or formal politics.

For some of the Bulgarian focus group participants, participation means to be involved in the policy-making process or by being volunteers in various NGOs. However, the participants mentioned that they did not have any personal experiences of civic/political participation, as they were not members of any group or association. One respondent said that their participation was hindered mainly because of the ineffectiveness of the existing participation mechanisms. Another Bulgarian participant argued that Roma are trying to sort things out in a *“rather diplomatic way”* and avoid marches, protests against authorities and other such kinds of activities. Bozhidar (19 years old, student from Bulgaria), pointed to some of the challenges Roma youth face when it comes to participation: *“If we had more opportunities and resources, we would have had the motivation to participate.”*

For Orbán (23 years old, social work student from Hungary) participation takes different forms: *“I voice my dislike/dissatisfaction, I take part in campaigns, I am taking part in this discussion now...”* Similarly, for Marina (27 years old, social inclusion trainee from Hungary) participation in a broader sense includes discussing politics with friends and family members, voicing out concerns related to issues specific to women or even [ethical] shopping choices.

The Romanian participants pointed out that they are all part of a youth club founded in 2016 which enabled them to become activists. Some of the specific forms of participation for the Romanian participants were protests (i.e., against violence against women), voting, or different public manifestations against injustices.



### 3. THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF ROMA YOUTH

The importance of youth participation has been enshrined in different international standards and frameworks.<sup>15</sup> Through our focus groups, Roma youth brought new insights into the importance of the civic and political participation of young Roma.

Firstly, youth participation was considered important because they see themselves as the **generation of the future**. Secondly, participants of the focus groups said that investment in the youth sector can be justified because **young people are more progressive and innovative when compared to current leadership**. Thirdly, respondents believed that more senior generations of leaders have failed to address the needs of youth and this led to youth being excluded from the discussion table for too long. Last but not least, they thought that Roma youth have a much **higher potential to decrease systemic racism**. We elaborate on these points below

#### YOUTH – THE FUTURE GENERATION

When asked why it is important to discuss young people's civic and political commitment, Orbán (23 years old, social work student from Hungary) summarizes very well the opinions of a high number of participants: ***"We are the generation of the future!"***. While participants like Orbán consider themselves part of the youth category based on their age other participants tend to rather distance themselves from this understanding, pointing out that age is not a decisive factor in defining a young person.

Adrienn (26 years old, sociologist from Hungary) states that it is important to talk about youth because they are the most receptive and the most responsive group. Similarly, Gábor (27 years old, social work student from Hungary) pointed out that young people will shape the next historical periods; ***"they are enthusiastic, not burnt out yet, so it is important to be with them, transfer our knowledge to them, which they can use to change the future"***.

Adding to what Adrienn and Gábor said, Josué (26 years old university student from Spain) pointed out that participation is important, because when we talk about young people, young Roma, we are talking about the generation that will shape the future of society; that is why making policies that take them into account is important.

Reflecting on their current work, some of the Slovak respondents stated that there is a need for a generational change; working with young people is key because ***"We have to look 20 years ahead"*** says Daniel (20 years old, psychology student and mentor). Another Slovak participant reflected that a focus on youth is important because young people, knowing what needs to be changed, can help address the mistakes and the gaps of the system.

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<sup>15</sup> See Phiren Amencia's report "Roma Youth Participation in Europe: Challenges, Needs and Opportunities Roma youth perspectives".

For Samaria (17 years old high school student from Romania) participation in public life represents a link in a larger chain where Roma youth acquire information and knowledge which are then passed to other generations or youngsters who do not have access to such opportunities, thus helping them to understand complex matters of participation and policymaking. For Madalin (17 years old, high school student from Romania) participation is also a way to get informed, to grow personally, whereas for Andra (17 years old, high school student from Romania) participation is an instrument through which Roma youth can reach out to other young people and make them aware of their rights and what they can do for themselves and the people around them.

## ROMA YOUNG PEOPLE'S POTENTIAL FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Focus group participants across the covered countries expressed the potential young Roma can bring for the development of their communities. For example, the Bulgarian participants confirmed that it is important to be involved in advocacy and policy making related to the Roma community, especially when it comes to youth policies. According to them there is need for more young Roma people to be involved in building policies related to Roma inclusion, since young people mobilize communities and bring in their creativity: *“As people who live in a Roma community, we are familiar with the conditions in which this community lives, and we understand better than anyone else the problems communities face. It is important to advocate and show the real problems of the community”* says Jenya (19 years old, student).

Research participants from Kosovo believe that the topic of youth is central to the general discourse on civic and political engagement, and Roma youth's participation is an inseparable feature of it. For Visar (23 years old, unemployed), young people have the will and the energy to push things forward and they can be a strong and critical voice. However, he believes that Roma youth should participate in broader initiatives and not limit themselves to Roma issues only. Similarly, Linda, (22 years old, intern) believes that youth could bring the much-needed change in politics and civic engagement.

Adrienn from Hungary (26 years old, sociologist) believes that the views of young people contribute to the development of societies. The added value of youth participation lies also in the capacity of young people to be creative and bring in new ideas when it comes to addressing Roma specific issues.

In Serbia, young Roma like Sadik (30 years old) think that young people find it easier to bring positive changes to the community *“because young Roma will work to improve the position of their community; they are more willing and able to make changes for the better”*. Kilino (25 years old, from Serbia) also believes that *“young Roma think independently and are more critical; do not want to adapt to every [political] party and idea; are more critical in terms of knowing themselves and are confident in their knowledge and abilities”*.

# SENIOR GENERATIONS FAILED TO ADDRESS ROMA YOUTH NEEDS

Besides the preference of some focus group participants to distance themselves from the much younger Roma generation - even though they fit in the standard age group cohort - this report also shows that different generations of Roma activists refer to the younger and older generations from various perspectives: the 15-25 years olds refer to those in their 30s as the older generation whereas the 30-40s think about the 50-60s as the older generation.

In one of Phiren Amenca's research reports targeting Roma youth participation through a survey<sup>16</sup> respondents identified a generational clash within the Roma movement. That report shows that within the broader Roma movement, there are frictions and debates. One of them is the ideological rift between the older, conservative generation and the younger, more liberal, radical generation of Roma youth activists. As a result, Roma youth see participation in specific youth-focused activities as a way of making their own voice heard. These findings have also been validated through the focus groups conducted for the current research.

Gábor from Hungary (27 years old, social work student) pointed out that Roma in general, and Roma youth in particular have been excluded from structures of representation for a long time: *“we cannot adequately represent ourselves. It is important to represent Roma, because issues which need to be solved in society are related to them [Roma].”* However, according to Gábor older people are harder to mobilize and are more reluctant to change. In addition to this, Zoli (21 years old, sociology student from Hungary) states that young people can be mobilized much easier, and they are more open to change. Young people are open to embrace positive values (i.e., caring, integrity, honesty, responsibility) and are receptive to different views: *“older people have this tunnel view; they think that this or that is the only good direction...”*

Pointing out the same generational differences, Erdin (18 years old, high school student from Montenegro) states that the previous generation [referring to his parents' generation] is more educated than the one before his, but on the other hand the younger generation *“has caught that rhythm when it comes to walking forward; and young people have higher ambitions”*. Sebastian (19 years old, high school student and activist), another Roma from Montenegro with 5 years' experience in the Roma youth movement, pointed out that *“the older generations look at young people and they don't give us a chance to tell them what we think. How do they know we don't know?”*

Dragoljub from Serbia (26 years old) thinks that both the older and the younger people understood that it was no longer appropriate for older people to decide what will suit young people. In addition, he stated that young people are missing from the formal political scene as compared to the more senior generations: *“As for the young people today, I think they are a little behind the older ones [...] who were involved in politics. Today, when I look around, we don't have young people who are interested in political parties; I do not know of any young person who is politically active here in Niš.”*

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<sup>16</sup> See Phiren Amenca's report “Roma Youth Participation in Europe: Challenges, Needs and Opportunities Roma youth perspectives”.

# ROMA YOUTH'S POTENTIAL TO DECREASE ANTIGYPSYISM

Roma youth participation has been shown by previous research to be an important mechanism for fighting antigypsyism.<sup>17</sup> Adrienn (26 years old, sociologist from Hungary) claims that systemic racism is widespread in Hungary. According to her if youth participate actively, racism can be decreased even at the institutional level. For Marina (27 years old social inclusion trainee from Hungary), addressing injustices against Roma means working on a daily basis in an area which is treated as a taboo by mainstream society, and which entails dealing with a system constructed against Roma. She thinks that because of the wide-spread antigypsyism and the media reproducing stereotypes about the Roma, the general population becomes even more skeptical about actions targeting Roma.

For Elena (30 years old, music teacher from Bulgaria) antigypsyism is reflected in how local authorities and policymakers deal with Roma issues: *“they do not even bother to enter the community to see what problems they [Roma] face”*. In the absence of responsible state institutions and dedicated Roma leaders, it becomes paramount that young Roma activists step in and are involved: *“It is very difficult to solve a problem, when you yourself [non-Roma authorities and policy-makers] do not know what the problem is. For this reason, I think that our involvement in politics is extremely important”* says Elena.

Romanian focus group participants also pointed out that Roma youth have the potential to fight antigypsyism. Some of them stated that some of the challenges in their work are to do with Roma-targeted discrimination and violence, and the fact that there are no effective mechanisms to tackle discrimination and antigypsyism. Romina (16 years old, high school student) claims that for her the biggest challenge or barrier are other people: *“people in general do not understand what we are fighting for; they do not listen to us, and they do not even try to understand what we want to say”*. For her, this is a result of the cultural and racial differences that exist in the Romanian society.

## FORMALIZING (ROMA) YOUTH PARTICIPATION THROUGH LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS

There are several international and European agreements and frameworks which recognize the importance of youth participation (i.e., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion, etc.) yet there is a discrepancy between such frameworks and the realities of Roma youth. The focus groups explored how Roma youth perceive such tools and whether they see any benefits of having specific frameworks on Roma youth participation.

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<sup>17</sup> Roma Youth Participation and Inclusion in Standards, Policies, and Programmes in Europe, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/study-on-roma-youth-participation-by-margareta-matache/1680a131e1>



The results of the focus groups showed that Roma youth are not familiar with such frameworks. In Hungary, most of the respondents stated that they do not know the content of these frameworks and refrained themselves from commenting on their usefulness. Some Hungarian participants welcomed such initiatives:

*“They are useful politically, of course. I do not believe anymore that they can reach the levels or places they should, and where they are needed. The gap is so big [between policy and realities] that they cannot be implemented. But of course, all developments are important”* says Marina (27 years old, social inclusion trainee from Hungary).

For Renata (30 years old, NGO director from Slovakia) the lack of knowledge on such tools shows that Roma do not make the most of the instruments they have at hand to address their issues. For her, this shows that Roma are missing important opportunities they in fact are entitled to.

For another respondent from North Macedonia, the issue is much more complex:

*“People in general do not know the Declaration of Human Rights and the constitution [of their countries]. Often, they get irritated when someone is calling upon these declarations or the constitution. But this is a problem of the education system, as this indicates that the system does not want to have a civically aware society. [...]. First, we need to educate ourselves in general. There are people who work with those types of documents and our government acts like a bad student. They just try to fulfil the minimum criteria to get it done. But the realization of these documents is sometimes weak. Once something is done it will be announced and celebrated but after 5 months or 5 years - no results”.*

Denis (33 years old, education mediator, from North Macedonia)

Some of the Serbian participants pointed out that although the Serbian state has adopted various strategies and documents, they mean nothing to a Roma settlement. Many things have been adopted by the state yet are not implemented: *“there is no concrete benefit, I think the community has no benefit”* says Sadik (30 years old). Kilino, another Serbian participant (25 years old) argues that the question is not the existence of policies, but how those policies are applied on the ground: *“that sounds great when you have documents and you can refer to them when you write projects and form some ideas, but the question is whether the documents serve what they were created for”.*

## 4. ROMA YOUTH PARTICIPATION ACROSS EUROPE: COUNTRY SPECIFIC ISSUES

The part of the report is dedicated to presenting respondents' detailed and selected views regarding Roma youth participation within their country's context. In each country, respondents commented on different aspects of their respective countries' context. The report distinguishes between European Union Member States and non-EU countries. The analysis follows the main themes presented in the Annex: for every country context there is an elaboration on the socio-demographics of the respondents and their experiences with Roma activism. The analysis also presents a set of questions that address the needs and challenges of Roma youth when it comes to participation.

### BULGARIA

The Bulgarian focus group was conducted with six young Roma: Radko (27 years old, male, working as a lawyer, from Kotel), Bojidar (19 years old, male, student from Belomorci) Jenya (19 years old, female, student, from Pleven), Bogomila (19 years old, female, student, from Pevcite), Elena (30 years old, female music teacher, from Levski) and Tashko (25 years old, male, unemployed from Montana).

In Bulgaria, the indisputable fact, according to focus group participants, is that the acts of racism and xenophobia, and manifestations of prejudice and ethnic stereotypes have not disappeared. When it comes to the specific needs and challenges, Roma women, youth and children are the groups that encounter specific challenges that have not been properly addressed until now.

*“The biggest barrier [to participation] may be that I am of Roma origin”!* says Elena.

*“The prejudices and stereotypes of others - the majority, towards us - the minority, are one of the biggest barriers for me [to participate]”* claims Bogomila.

Regarding Roma women some of the challenges respondents identified refer to early school leaving of Roma girls, low employment rates of Roma women, early motherhood and reproductive health concerns, maltreatment in maternity care, domestic violence, trafficking of Roma women and children, early marriages, low levels of Roma women representation in public administration and in elected positions, and stereotypes and prejudices towards Roma women.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See also: ERRC. (2020). Reproductive Rights of Romani Women in Bulgaria. Available online at: [http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload\\_en/file/5229\\_file1\\_reproductive-rights-of-romani-women-in-bulgaria.pdf](http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/5229_file1_reproductive-rights-of-romani-women-in-bulgaria.pdf)

Discussing more broadly Roma youth and children's situation, some of the most prominent issues identified by respondents referred, among many others, to: child poverty, the high rate of children in state care<sup>19</sup>, violence against children, substance abuse, unhealthy nutrition, the impact of migration on children, and the concerning situation of young people who are not in education, employment or training<sup>20</sup>. According to focus groups participants, Whether young people are studying, are students or working, if they are of Roma origin, they inevitably face multiple stereotypes at all levels that they have to overcome.

As far as advocacy and active participation in policy-making is concerned, all participants from Bulgaria believe that it happens mainly through non-governmental organizations. According to focus group participants the Roma do not trust any party, but are still willing to vote for a fee, hence the distrust in Roma leaders and activists. Young Roma leaders prefer to advocate through the tools of non-governmental organizations, protests, rallies, or advocacy campaigns, but not through party politics. Participants still do not know about any young Roma leader who could represent them at regional, national or European level. Participants in the focus group were convinced that young Roma must be involved in order to take an active part in building national frameworks related to Roma inclusion, as they are best placed to know the problems affecting their community. Participants concluded that there is a need for active participation of Roma youth in all stages of the policy-making process (planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and policy review).

## HUNGARY

In Hungary, the focus group was composed of five young Roma: Orbán (23 years old, male, social work student), Adrienn (26 years old, female, sociologist), Marina (27 years old, female, Roma inclusion trainee), Zoli (21 years old, male, sociology student) and Gábor (27 years old, male, social work student).

While all the participants identify themselves as activists, none of them grew up in a Roma activists' family. When asked whether the Roma youth are aware of a Roma movement in their country/ region, some of the respondents pointed out that those Roma youth living in cities or Roma colleges/dormitories are more likely to be informed about the existence of a Roma movement, yet respondents were not certain. Hungarian focus group participants made it clear that there is no direct connection between high levels of formal education and activism: ***“They do not have to be educated. [Activism] is exactly what motivates us to become more educated”*** says Gábor. Marina contends that it depends on the level or the layer of activism ***“on some levels such as decision-making or advocacy there is a need for formal education; for project implementation on grassroots level education is not necessary”***.

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<sup>19</sup> See also: ERRC. (2021). Blighted Lives: Romani Children in State Care. Available online at: [http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload\\_en/file/5284\\_file1\\_blighted-lives-romani-children-in-state-care.pdf](http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/5284_file1_blighted-lives-romani-children-in-state-care.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> See also: ERGO Network. (2017). What work(s) for young Roma? Available online at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Final-Employment-Research-Report1.pdf>



Almost all respondents pointed out that they started activism as a matter of personal choice or as a follow up of being introduced to an organization and people involved in those structures:

*“I do not know if I am an activist, I cannot define it. I became interested in social problems before identifying myself as an activist. But it is important for me to create changes, affect my environment, and to work with disadvantaged youth with my own means. My academic work is also related to Roma issues”* says Adrienn.

For Zoli becoming an activist was a personal decision *“It came spontaneously. I study sociology, I wanted to work in this area, then I saw UCCU’s call [UCCU Roma Informal Educational Foundation], I applied, and I have been here since. The goal was to dismantle the stereotypes I brought with me”*.

When asked whether Roma youth feel represented by the current Roma youth leaders in their country or at the European level, some of the Hungarian participants stated that they do not know who represents Roma youth:

*“I do not know who they are exactly (if there are any at all), who represent Roma youth, or take up political roles. I do not know anyone like this. Maybe it is my lack of knowledge, that I do not look into it. But I would like to believe that those who say they represent Roma youth, are trying to do something to make my life better/easier”* thinks Adrienn.

The aspect of Roma youth representation is highly influenced by the extent to which those who support young Roma are visible and reach out to as many Roma youth as possible. For some of the respondents the main role of national and European representatives is to inform Roma youth about what opportunities they can access. Participants also pointed out that most of the time the flow of information and opportunities stays among the better off Roma youth: *“They [representatives] mostly support those who are already in or planning to enter higher education. Not the elementary school students, not those who are excluded. Those are not reached; they do not know about these opportunities. Their [Roma youth organizers’] task in activism is to reach these young people”* (Zoli).

Participants were asked what are the specific challenges or barriers that young Roma activists face, especially when defending Roma rights, mobilizing communities or acting on behalf of other Roma are.

A first barrier was the lack of resources and scarcity of funding for Roma civil society organizations and advocacy groups. Secondly, related to the point above, politics plays a crucial role. In Hungary politics is leaning towards right-conservatism. According to Zoli, it is all about politics and what values politicians promote. In the case of Roma, Hungarian politicians tend to have negative attitudes towards the Roma, with the media playing an important role in wide-spreading antigypsyist rhetoric: *“This is what the majority hears, which makes it even harder to initiate change”* says Adrienn.

Another challenge identified by the young Hungarian Roma respondents refers to the lack of cooperation between Roma and non-Roma organizations, and their lack of openness when it comes to using new approaches to mobilize Roma youth and cooperate with Roma youth organizations.

In Slovakia, the focus group was conducted with five young Roma as follows: Tomas (20 years old, university student and youth activist); Daniel (20 years old, psychology student and mentor), Viliam (21 years old, university student and professional sportsman), Renata (30 years old, female, NGO director) and Ivan (29 years old, university student and NGO leader).

One of the biggest challenges Roma youth expressed in Slovakia was the emergence of ultranationalist forces throughout the country. This phenomenon was manifested both through media and public anti-Roma campaigns, which spread hoaxes and disinformation, according to Daniel.

Open prejudice and discrimination are other challenges identified by the Slovak participants. Viliam pointed out the general prejudice coming from the majority society towards Roma, but also from Roma towards civil society organizations working with Roma. This phenomenon can be partially explained by the general mistrust Roma have towards institutions and organizations that are active in the field, and the assumption that their motivation for working with Roma is only financial. Participants further reflected on the skepticism some Roma have towards the work of civil society and referred to their refusal to collaborate: ***“they think you don't want to help them, so they don't want to cooperate”*** says Tomas. “This is discouraging for young Roma activists” adds Viliam.

For youngsters like Renata, it is the position of Roma youth within the broader Roma movement that hinders youth participation. According to her, both the elderly generation and also the environment in which Roma youth operate, discourage young Roma’s activism. Roma youth have a lower position when compared to established leadership. This results in a low self-confidence among them. Additionally, participants in the focus group stated that Roma youth have a wide range of personal interests and hobbies that makes it difficult for them to manage their time effectively and engage in activism.

The Slovak group put forward recommendations for enhancing Roma youth participation focusing on Roma youth themselves but also on more structural aspects. First, respondents believe that ***“in order for Roma youth to be politically and socially active, they need to know what their rights are, what they can do, and speak up”*** says Daniel.

Secondly, for some of the respondents, participation is also an issue of motivation and positioning oneself in their community and the world. Renata points out that for many young Roma participation is not even a concern because they are preoccupied with making a living day by day. As a response to that Viliam adds that ***“it would be good to present a bigger picture of the future that will reassure them [Roma youth] that it is worth getting involved”***.

Thirdly, respondents pointed out the role of civil society organizations, mentors and public institutions in reaching out, recruiting and informing Roma youth about the different instruments they have available for addressing their needs. Tomas said that it is of utmost importance for Roma youth to get engaged with associations and school or student councils.

This could be a starting point for many young Roma to get familiar with existing structures, projects, ways of working, etc. Tomas also thought the role of mentors in supporting Roma youth to develop personally and professionally and to inspire them to take initiative is important. Mentors can help Roma youth to avoid exclusion but also to change one's mindset and life perspectives, stated the young Roma from Slovakia.

Finally, Slovak participants emphasized that state level institutions working with/on Roma should be more open to Roma youth and set the example for other institutions and structures working on Roma issues. A specific recommendation was for the Roma Plenipotentiary (USVRK) to employ young Roma within the institution. Another proposal was the creation of Young Roma Ambassadors whose main role would be to outreach, inspire and inform young Roma across the country, create a safe environment and act together on behalf of Roma youth.

## SPAIN

In Spain, the focus group was composed of five young Roma: Paco (27 years old, male, activist, university student and school promotor), Israel (26 years old, male, student), Ángel (23 years old, male, Roma NGO worker), Josué (26 years old, male, university student), and Agustín (26 years old, male, student).

All the Spanish respondents pointed out that they did not grow up in Roma activist families and just two of them consider themselves as such. Paco and Israel shared that they started activism because they got inspired by other youth activists. While Roma civic and political activism is quite strong in Spain, our respondents stated that most of the Roma youth are not aware of a Roma movement in their country or region. Similarly, they said that they do not feel represented by the current Roma youth leaders either in their country, or at the European level.

Spanish participants thought that there should be specific policies targeting Roma youth, especially within the mainstream youth policies, because the policies available do not reflect the realities and needs of Roma youth as opposed to those of the non-Roma youth:

***“There must be specific policies that take into account the differences [of Roma youth], such as in access to housing and other areas” says Israel. “We have some cultural peculiarities that must be taken into account. We do not face life in the same way [as non-Roma]; antigypsyism is there and we face many more difficulties”*** stated Paco.

Participants think that in general, the opportunities available for Roma youth across Europe - i.e., the ones from the Roma Education Fund - leave out Spanish Roma youth. For example, Paco mentioned that the Roma from Portugal have a lot of support from the Council of Europe, but the Roma in Spain are ***“outsiders”*** when it comes to these policies and programmes.

Possible explanations for the lack of opportunities mentioned by the participants are the weak leadership among Roma associations and Spanish Roma youngsters, but also the perceived monopoly of some civil society organizations when it comes to Roma issues. For example, it was argued that some well-known organizations working on Roma issues in Spain, are considered to represent Roma at the national and European levels. Consequently, they get significant financial support to further Roma and Roma youth interests, yet this is not happening in practice.

When it comes to the specific challenges or barriers that Spanish Roma youth face in defending Roma rights, mobilizing communities or acting on behalf of other Roma, several problems were identified.

Firstly, there is a lack of knowledge among Spanish Roma youth about specific policies or programs targeting Roma youth participation. According to participants of the focus group, Roma youth don't have the knowledge about Roma participation processes or youth participation in general.

Participants felt that the youth movement is not interested in having Roma youth represented in their structures. Israel pointed out that the youth movement is rather ignorant when it comes to Roma youth, and that most of the time, Roma youth are not given the chance to get involved in the Spanish youth movement. As a reaction to this, the Spanish respondents expressed that they are more interested in getting involved in other emerging movements such as the women's or the LGBTIQ+ movement.

Another challenge Roma youth face when it comes to active involvement is related to Roma organizations in Spain. Participants shared that Roma organizations are seen as "speakers" or contact points of the government, yet they are not open enough to have Roma youth represented. According to Agustín: ***"One of the problems is that the participation of young Roma can happen only through Roma entities and if you are not involved in one, you are invisible. And this makes you [as Roma youth] lose interest"***. In such conditions, it is difficult for Spanish Roma youth to defend Roma rights and mobilize communities, because they feel they don't have the support of either mainstream Roma organizations and or youth organizations.

In addition, the Spanish participants mentioned time and resources as being important barriers for them in order to fully participate. According to Josué: ***"The problem is that we [Roma youth] have to fight much more compared to other groups to be heard. We have to invest a lot of time to be heard and then to see if they will listen to us. So, this causes you to lose interest. The main barriers are put by the "hearers" that don't listen to us"***. Similarly, Paco states that besides the structural factors there are also individual ones: ***"We also lack personal time and resources to be able to participate actively. I work in the morning, I study in the afternoon/evening and with a schedule like this, participating is difficult. It's a shame, because we are condemned to this. And the issue of antigypsyism also makes it difficult for us"***.

Focus group participants were asked who should be doing what to help Spanish Roma youth get publicly active and engaged?



To this question, almost all of the respondents replied that Roma organizations should be helping Roma youngsters to get active, instead of blocking or stopping them. For Josué it is important that Roma associations join forces and open doors to all Roma, especially young people.

Roma organizations have an important role, especially in giving information to youngsters and informing them about the different ways on how they can participate:

***“Roma associations should provide knowledge to Roma youngsters. Youth organizations/councils should also care if Roma are represented or not and make it possible for them to be present”*** says Israel.

As a response to the challenges of getting involved in mainstream Roma organizations, some of the participants expressed the need for the creation of Roma youth structures - such as a Roma Youth Council (Consejo de Juventud Gitana) - which would represent Roma youth interests and would make Roma youth less dependent on both mainstream youth and mainstream Roma organizations.

While strong Roma civic representation structures are important, participants also believe that public institutions and governments are ultimately responsible for Roma and Roma youth, and without their support most of the efforts would be in vain: ***“Roma associations should make the Roma youth visible and help them, but I also believe that the government should be willing to listen”*** says Ángel. State institutions listening to and considering the concerns of Roma and Roma youth is an important mechanism allowing for a thoughtful and constructive engagement with the Roma. This can allow those in power to respond meaningfully to the issues and concerns of Roma youth.

## ROMANIA

In Romania, the focus group was conducted with six Roma youth from Mizil<sup>21</sup> (Prahova county): David (20 years old, male), Ruben (19 years old, male, high school student), Romina (16 years old, female, high school student), Madalin (17 years old, male, high school student), Samira (17 years, female, high school student), and Andra (17 years, female, high school student). They represent the youngest group of all those covered through focus group discussions. The Roma from Mizil has been one of the key communities where E-Romnja, an organization focusing mainly on women and youth, has been working.

All the participants in the focus group had been involved in the activities of E-Romnja, and most of them stated they were part of the local working group on Roma youth established by the organization. The local working group started in 2016, when most of the Romanian Roma participants were very young. Through it, Roma youth started to develop as activists, to get much more involved, and at the same time, to learn about Roma history and key political events.

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<sup>21</sup> According to the National Institute of Statistics, Mizil is a rather small city with a population of approximately 15.000 residents out of which 16% Roma.

Romina, although new in the group, considered herself an activist. She took part in different activities both online and offline, and she shared her enjoyment of being part of different local actions. Similarly, Andra said that for her, being part of this group meant a much more systematic involvement in the life of her community and at the same time, she has learned a lot about the Roma culture.

While the Romanian focus group participants stated that they might not be familiar with the Romanian Roma movement, some of them identified key Roma activists and professionals that work with Roma youth. For some, well-known Romanian activists served as an inspiration for Roma youth to become involved, whereas for others their motivation was driven by the discrimination they have encountered in school: *“A lot of [Roma] children are passing through this and they need to learn how to become stronger”* says Samira. Similarly, Madalin points out that *“When you are discriminated against, but you are an activist, you learn how to approach the situation”*.

Participants were asked whether they feel represented by the current Roma and Roma youth leaders at the national level, and whether they feel that Roma youth are represented in an adequate manner. Their responses show that the leaders representing Roma youth are quite well known, yet their voices as young people are heard only in small circles because the others [in general] are not interested in listening to them. Madalin pointed out that through E-Romnja Roma youth from his community are listened to and represented *“Whenever we had problems in the community [E-Romnja] always helped”*.

Reflecting upon Roma youth representation at the European level some of the participants said that there are different groups who are able to make their voices heard, mainly from those countries with high numbers of Roma population. Participants consider that at the European level the Roma voices are much better heard than at the national level.

Andra pointed out that another important challenge is the inactivity of some members of the community: *“If we are planning to organize a protest everyone agrees; we prepare, we do stuff and then people come up with different excuses. We have to be aware that if we are part of a group, we need to be active and punctual”*. Madalin added that the extent to which Roma youth are encouraged and given the support they need to participate also matters. Romina added that participation is also a matter of information and awareness of what might be the consequences of those actions *“We have to be informed. It is not okay to organize an activity just like that without being aware of what will happen from what we are doing.”*

Finally, when asked who should be doing what to support Roma youth to become active and more involved in the public sphere the opinions were diverse. Andra said that Roma youth themselves can start to spread the word about the situation of their families. Samaria added that the public institutions are in need of structural reform in order to be more inclusive to Roma youth voices: *“If we are going to the mayor’s office we are told to get out because we are “gypsies”, we are uneducated, that we are stupid. They should stop being racists!”*.

The focus group in Kosovo was conducted with seven participants: Lendrit (30 years old, male, public servant from Gjakove), Fatos (26 years old, male, student, from Gjakove), Kendiza (19 years old, female, student, from Gjakove), Sabina (21 years old, female, intern, from Prizren), Visar (23 years old, male, unemployed, from Gjakove), Linda (22 year old, female, intern from Peje) and Valon (21 years old, male, student, from Rahovec).

Kosovo is one of the youngest European countries, it gained its independence in 2008. Minority issues are quite new in the public and political discourse, as in the past the main emphasis was on the 'majority' conflict between Serbs and Albanians and their interethnic relations. After the 1999 war and Kosovo's 2008 independence, the rights of minorities, such as Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities gained more consideration. This means that most of the Roma activists are among the first generation of activists in their respective families. The focus group participants do consider themselves as activists. When asked what motivates them to act on behalf of Roma communities, they said that their motivation comes from the lack of change they can see in their community rather than from other activists. Most of the Roma youth taking part in the focus group stated that they do not feel represented by their current political leaders.

The discussion brought out various challenges and barriers young Roma activists face, especially when taking action to defend or mobilize their community. The first and foremost barrier mentioned by all participants was the lack of cooperation between activists and people from their communities. Participants believe that more cooperation between activists and community members would greatly enhance the benefit of activism for the community.

Another challenge mentioned was the lack of motivation of young Roma people to contribute to their society. Respondents believe that society is 'losing the spirit of being an activist'. If there is no monetary gain, it becomes hard to convince someone to be part of a campaign.

For Visar, self- victimization is another key challenge that slows down progress. For him, this is a trap Roma need to get out of. For Sabina, the biggest challenge in her daily activism is being a woman and a minority, whereas for Lendrit is the lack of representation of young people in decision-making processes. According to Lendrit, the state is not giving appropriate space to Roma youth, even though Roma youth can contribute much more than they get back from the state. Lendrit believes that hiding an identity is another pivotal challenge. According to him, there is a high number of young people from Roma communities that do not declare their ethnic belonging.

Another common challenge mentioned by all participants is the poor representation of Roma youth. They see that community leaders, both in civil and political levels, are mostly incompetent and inadequate. For Kendiza, the reliability of reports and research conducted on Roma presents another challenge: ***“NGOs do not really come down to the community and talk to them; research is mainly a checkbox for their projects. Reports are not reliable. [...] They talk to a very limited number of people and they draw conclusions”.***



NGOs' research plays an important role in depicting the situation, needs and concerns of Roma communities. Participants underlined that if research does not reflect the realities of Roma communities, efforts for the betterment of their situation would certainly fail.

For some others, a challenge in their civic engagement is that they sometimes feel being left out. Valon, who comes from a smaller municipality, said that activism is still not a common thing because civil society organizations are focused on big cities only. In his municipality, there isn't any organization that works with their community.

The discussion with participants highlighted the pessimism that exists among youth when it comes to trust in leadership, institutions or even in civil society organizations. On the political level, Roma youth are not satisfied with their political representation. They believe that their community could be better represented if young people were more involved and if they were given the space. When it comes to civil society organizations, respondents believe that NGOs in Kosovo are not innovative, their activities are repetitive, and they are not tackling community issues proactively. Moreover, participants think that placements on NGOs' leadership are not based on meritocracy, and that is demoralizing Roma youth. As a result, participants concluded that Roma youth need to be more vocal and determined in demanding what they want, and what their community deserves.

## SERBIA

In Serbia the focus group was conducted with six young Roma from different cities across the country: Dragoljub (26 years old, male, from Niš), Kilino (25 years old, male, from Novi Bečej), Sandra (20 years old, female, from Valjevo), David (23 years old, male, from Zaječar), Svetlana (21 years old, female, from Zaječar), and Sadik (30 years old, male, from Niš).

Most of the focus group participants grew up in activist families. Sadik reflected on the different forms of activism his grandparents were involved in the former Yugoslavia when folklore groups were formed: "My grandfather was a choreographer in the Roma association, they won various medals in the former Yugoslavia, in Europe, in England." Sandra's father participated in the development of the profession of Roma pedagogical assistants ten years ago. She grew up in a circle of Roma-related educational activists and this had an impact on her becoming an activist: ***"I wanted to participate myself [become a Roma pedagogical assistant] when I grew up. I found inspiration in both older and younger people; I certainly had a nice feeling that I was doing something that would improve our community"*** says Sandra.

David started to be involved with activism by chance, with his sister persuading him to attend the activities of a Roma association: ***"First, I was wondering what I was going to do there, until sometime passed and I saw some great things are being done for the community; activities that I could learn from and contribute to myself."***

Working with an NGO had a significant impact on Dragoljub, as he said. He shared that he has not been aware of Roma-related developments in his community before, but he engaged in this type of work after attending a series of workshops organized by NGOs. Svetlana's experience was rather different: looking for jobs, she saw NGO work as a way to support other young Roma and at the same time as an opportunity for her professional development.

Participants believe that most young Roma do not know that there is a Roma movement in Serbia. Sadik pointed out that there are several Roma people who perceive the Roma movement as a group of people who make money off the backs of other Roma. However, their point of view changed when they saw how the movement can work for their own benefit. On the contrary, for Sandra, the Roma movement represents a group of Roma aiming to make significant changes in the lives of Roma communities. In her opinion, the movement is getting bigger, yet she believes that there is a need to make the movement be heard and better known among the Roma.

Some participants pointed out that there is strong collaboration between Roma youth from different cities and regions and that there is a big potential in the Roma youth movement. However, this potential cannot be reached because of the elderly generation which does not allow youth to be visible and take the lead. For Dragoljub, young Roma people have always been the initiators of change, they are educated and active. Pointing to the intergenerational clash, Sadik claims that one of the problems is within the community itself: ***“young Roma cannot express themselves because of older leaders, who claim themselves as the spokespersons of the whole Roma community even though the Roma community often does not agree with those spokespersons”***.

The Serbian participants pointed out that Roma youth activism became visible in the last 5-6 years, and they think that in order for change to occur it takes time. Kilino, who has been involved in different initiatives with the purpose of creating Roma youth policies, claims that all these efforts resulted in a process of youth participation, but nothing sustainable came out of them. He said that ***“there are a lot of young people who do some great things in their local communities”*** yet their approaches to work with the community are not recognized or taken further.

When asked about the specific challenges or barriers that young Roma activists face, especially when defending Roma rights, mobilizing communities or acting on behalf of other Roma, Serbian participants identified several main challenges. First, Roma youth said that they face individual barriers such as the fear of public appearance and public speaking. Structural antigypsyism is another important challenge. Participants pointed out that mainstream institutions and organizations are tone-deaf to Roma problems. Others noted that young Roma do not participate in the work of the youth sector in Serbia because they are not invited to take part in it or are not recognized, and this results in Roma youth being seen as having a passive role within the mainstream youth movement. Dragoljub believes that outside of the safe space of their communities Roma youth are discriminated against and their opinions are not taken into consideration.

Some of the recommendations Serbian Roma youth propose for increasing the civic and political participation of Roma youth are addressed to the existing leadership both within the Roma and Roma youth movement. Dragoljub believes that there is a need for having more experienced Roma youth leaders who can lead and mentor the younger generations, but also initiate new activities. Sadik pointed out that more investment is needed in strengthening the capacity of young Roma. According to him, ensuring adequate resources and sustainability for Roma youth and Roma youth organizations is paramount for making sure that Roma youth are not left behind when it comes to meeting the requirements of certain donors or partners. In addition, Sadik added that the support from the state and decision-makers is very important if the authorities really want a strong Roma youth movement.

## ALBANIA

The focus group in Albania was conducted with eight Roma young people: Roxhers (25 years old, male, social worker), Raxhi (26 years old, male, member of city council in municipality of Elbasan), Aurora (29 years old, female, Institute of Romani Culture in Albania, social worker), Erion (33 years old, male, member of the state committee for minorities), Donald (20 years old, male, Roma Active Albania, peer educator), Kristiana (20 years old, female, Roma Active Albania, peer educator), Fjorela (24 years old, female, Romano Kham, social worker), and Siljana (20 years old, female, Romano Kham, student).

The focus group started with a discussion of the different opportunities that Albanian Roma youth and children have to access educational opportunities and foster Roma youth participation. Participants reported that young Roma in Albania are provided with free textbooks in primary school, there are quotas for Roma students in universities, 100% student fee exemption for Bachelor studies and 50% for Master studies, whereas those wishing to pursue vocational education and training can do so for free. However, while pupils might have free textbooks and university students benefit from reductions in tuition, there is little done to support young Roma high school graduates: there are no scholarships, no accommodation subsidies, no free textbooks.

Siljana pointed out that Roma youth who are interested in Roma issues, often participate in different training courses - about human rights and protection of the Roma community - organized by civil society organizations from Albania, the Western Balkans region and other European countries. Donald also mentioned the internships available for young Roma which are financed by different organizations and help them to grow professionally and gain some income. Such internships and professional development opportunities proved to have a positive impact on the future careers of young Roma in different state or international institutions and organizations. Raxhi added that a few years ago there was a partnership between different organizations and local municipalities to empower young Roma and women through grants and entrepreneurship training.

Kristina pointed out the need to inform Roma youth more broadly about the opportunities available to them. In her opinion, most of the time only those Roma who are connected with civil society organisations know about such opportunities, yet there are other young Roma who could also benefit from them.

Erion referred to the importance of political representation of Roma youth and thought that Roma issues could become more visible on decision-makers' agenda if Roma youth mobilized themselves to bring their needs and challenges to the attention of policy-makers.

Fjorela stated that there is a need for a mainstreaming approach when it comes to the participation of young Roma in youth activities: ***“I see only a few young Roma participating in mainstream youth activities. Young Roma participate in activities that are related only to Roma issues”*** she adds. In addition, participants believed that there was a need for youth organizations to include the voices of young Roma. Similarly, when organising activities for young people, institutions should not forget to reach out to young Roma and support their contribution and active involvement. There is a need to include Roma youth both as a target and as partners in the design and implementation of different strategies or action plans related to young people in general.

Participants of the Albanian focus group shared specific challenges young Roma activists face, especially when defending Roma rights, mobilizing communities or acting on behalf of other Roma. For Roxhers it is antigypsyism: ***“Many people have often told me “why do you work for those people, they will never change, leave them as they are”. When I told them that I am from the Roma community they said “Well, you are not like them, you are different”***. Fjorela adds that she also encountered racism from public institutions.

Erion, a member of the State Committee for Minorities, claimed that even though he works for an institution that is supposed to promote minorities and respect their rights he was often silenced, the people in the institution were full of stereotypes regarding Roma: ***“It took me 2 years to show them my skills and to break their stereotypes.”***

Raxhi, a member of the city council in the municipality of Elbasan, stated that those who work in Roma communities need to gain the community's trust starting with small things, and then, in the long run, much more can be done. For instance, when he was running the elections, he had to assure the community that through his mandate they would have a voice in the municipal council: ***“At the time of the elections, I convinced the community that my commitment to the municipal council would be their voice”***.

# NORTH MACEDONIA

The focus group in North Macedonia was conducted with five Roma youngsters: Gzime (35 years old, female, employed as teacher in kindergarten in Bitola), Semra (22 years old, female, student of pedagogy, Sumnal volunteer, from Skopje), Mukades (18 years old, female, high school student, from Bitola), Denis (33 years old, male, Roma education mediator, from Bitola) and Ferzije (22 years old, female, student in economy and accountancy, from Bitola). All the participants consider themselves activists and three of them grew up in a family of Roma activists. While most of them got inspired from other youth activists, one of the participants got motivated because he could not stand injustice.

When asked whether most of the Roma youth are aware of the Roma movement in their country or region, participants claimed that Roma youth are not well informed. While North Macedonia has been referred to as a model of Roma mobilization, the focus group participants stated that they do not feel represented by the current Roma youth leaders either in their country, or at the European level.

Some of the specific challenges or barriers that young Roma activists identified in defending Roma rights, mobilizing communities or acting on behalf of other Roma, are discrimination; lack of trust of the Roma community in Roma leaders; and no political will from those with power to decide on Roma matters. Mukades believes that discrimination, lack of appreciation and stereotypes about Roma are the biggest problem in North Macedonia.

Denis pointed out the need for having a comprehensive view on the youth movement and its openness to Roma youth: ***“It’s very important to discuss and get young Roma into the youth movements. If they don’t get involved, they will not get represented and their interests will not be represented”***. Denis argued that Roma activists are in between three ***“fires”***: the majority, public institutions and the Roma population. ***“Because of the political manipulation of the Roma in the past 30 years, people do not trust anyone anymore. When I go and talk to people to address some problem, even in a positive way as an NGO activist, they are immediately asking me: “From which political party are you? Why are you doing this?” They feel they are being manipulated even by the Roma community members”*** adds Denis.

When asked what should be done and by whom to help Roma youth get publicly active and engaged, participants mentioned two main topics. Firstly, they consider it important to strengthen the personal capacities of the young Roma: investing in young leaders, their skills and technical knowledge, can advance the interests of the community. Secondly, participants focused on the important role of civil society organizations. They agreed that the capacity of Roma youth NGOs has to be strengthened. They highlighted that for young Roma getting involved in NGO work at an early age had a positive impact on increasing their knowledge and awareness about Roma issues and that Roma NGOs have a crucial role in empowering young Roma to take initiative. According to Ferzije, NGOs have contributed to improving the situation of Roma much more than political institutions or the state therefore investment in NGOs is of utmost importance.



# MONTENEGRO

The focus group in Montenegro was conducted with seven young Roma from Podgorica, most of them involved in Walk with us- Phiren Amenca, as follows: Erdi (18 years old, male, highschool student), Sebastian (19 years old, male, highschool student, and active member of Walk with us- Phiren Amenca for the last 4-5 years), Hana (22 years old, female, unemployed), Violeta (21 years old, female, journalist for RomaNet), Dijamant (24 years old, female, collaborator for NGO Help), Vaid (19 years old, male, school mediator) and Sadrija (17 years old, female, high school student).

All but one of the Montenegrin participants considered themselves activists and contributors to the Roma community. Most of them have at least one person in the family who is an activist and who had a significant impact on them. Those who did not have an activist role model in their family looked up to someone from the community. They were influenced and intrigued by the efforts, events and positive results of others' work, which made them join the movement. Sebastian recalls that it was his brother who first invited him to a Roma-related workshop, whereas Vaid stated that he takes inspiration from his uncle, who is also an activist and supported him and other young Roma.

Discussing the Roma movement, participants claimed that most of the Roma youth in Montenegro do know about the Roma movement in their country or region. Sebastian compared the current situation with that of 10 years ago: ***“Today more people know that there are organizations which deal with Roma issues”***. His observation is based on his experience as a mediator in an NGO dealing with health issues. Participants stated that today Roma communities are much more familiar than before with the work of Roma activists and Roma-led NGOs and they trust them.

Talking about the representation of Roma youth at the national and European level, participants do not feel that current leaders represent their interests. Adding about the Roma political representation in Montenegro, Dijamant claims there is a structural issue: ***“We are the only ones in the Balkans who do not have a representative in parliament”***.

When it comes to who should represent Roma, participants believe that it should be someone from the community who has been and is still working for Roma without asking anything in return.

# ALBANIA

The focus group in Ukraine was conducted with seven young Roma: Volodymyr (31 years old, male, Roma activist), Oleg (35 years old, male, civil servant), Arseniy, (historian, male, 26 years old,), Anastasia (24 years old, female, lawyer), Diana (22 years old, female, student), Victor (32 years old, male, journalist) and Elvira (22 years old, female, student).

Most of the focus group participants grew up in families of Roma activists and almost half of them considered themselves young Roma activists. *“Activism became part of my life and I can’t separate it from my other activities”* shared Victor. Five out of the seven focus group participants said that most Roma youth are unaware of the existence of a Roma movement in their country: *“I think that [in spite of this] most of the Roma youth do know about the Roma movement. Even if they do not join the movement as activists, they hear that there are Roma organizations and that some events are taking place”* adds Diana. Victor stressed that if the Roma population knows little about Roma related activism, from his experience, the non-Roma population knows much less. For him, it is important for both sides to be informed about Roma-related activities because this affects how Roma are perceived. This often includes negative perceptions such as Roma being passive recipients of governmental support or lacking agency over their own communities. Being informed about the activism that happens within Roma communities can effectively fight such prejudices.

Almost all focus group participants stated that they started activism because they were inspired by other activists. For Elvira it was her aunt, who established her own Roma human rights organization, whereas for Diana it was her uncle and other older Roma who got educated abroad and became activists.

Participants compiled a list of challenges affecting Roma youth participation. According to Anastasia, participation is all about the involvement of others: *“People are not really interested in topics that go beyond their personal interests”*. Anastasia pointed out that most young people are not aware of the systemic barriers that affect Roma participation and how different aspects of social and political life are intertwined. She also reflected on the lack of knowledge and resources for Roma advocates and human rights organizations to take to court cases of Roma rights violations. As a continuation of this, Diana contended that the lack of knowledge among Roma themselves is another challenge: *“Because of the low level of education in most communities, Roma might not even realize their rights are violated”*.

In addition, Diana expressed that in some conservative communities young Roma are not motivated to join a social movement or initiate change. This is a result of the distrust and skepticism Roma youth face from their communities: *“They [Roma youth] are bombarded with a huge pile of questions and misunderstandings that affect their motivation. And that is why very often young people choose to be passive”*. Elvira also pointed out the lack of support from some community members for encouraging young Roma to join the movement as there are no material gains in it: *“[For some Roma] if you can’t make money on it, then it doesn’t make sense”*.

Acknowledging that activism is a great responsibility that not everyone can take on, Elvira believes that gender plays an important role in Roma youth participation: *“Although it is now the 21st century, many people still believe that a woman cannot be a leader and lead a team”*. In other words, there is an unequal representation of women in the Roma movement.



Victor shared that for him one of the biggest challenges is the lack of contacts and social networks he has access to. He stated that young people do not know where to turn for help. Despite the fact that Roma youth start some activities, their engagement fades away with time and this is mainly because they do not have support and do not know where to turn for it: ***“Many of the old organizations simply do not want to help young competitors. And there is no state support as such”*** he added.

Last but not least, Volodymyr pointed out that a major obstacle to civic activism is the lack of cooperation between the Roma community, Roma activists and the non-Roma. In his opinion Roma and non-Roma do not fully realize the need for collaboration and joint work: ***“It would be optimal to develop a joint action plan to achieve a common goal”*** he stated.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Although participants in the focus groups came from different countries, the barriers they identified with regards to Roma youth participation are to a certain extent similar and can be summarized as follows:

### 1. **Lack of knowledge and awareness about Roma activism, about opportunities available to young Roma, and about Roma youth rights**

One of the most frequent barriers mentioned by the research participants is the lack of knowledge among young Roma about specific policies or programs targeting Roma youth and Roma youth participation. Given the low level of education and civic engagement of most Roma communities, there is a lack of knowledge about their rights among Roma and Roma youth. According to the focus group participants, this poses a significant challenge since most Roma might not even realize their rights are violated. In addition, not knowing your rights also implies that most Roma do not make use of the instruments they have at hand to address their issues, and they are missing important opportunities they, in fact, are entitled to. In order for Roma youth to be politically and socially active, they need to know what their rights are and what they can do to protect those rights.

With Roma youth being the generation of the future, participants emphasized the need for the transfer of knowledge and information across generations. Participants believe that there is a lack of continuity among different generations of Roma activists which makes information about opportunities and avenues for participation less accessible for Roma youth. Participation was also considered a way to get informed, to grow personally, but also an instrument through which Roma youth can reach out to other young people, make them aware of their rights and what they can do for themselves and for the people around them.

Participants of the focus groups emphasized that Roma organizations have an important role in this respect, especially in informing young people about the different ways they can participate. For most participants, getting involved in NGO work at an early age had a positive impact on their knowledge and awareness about Roma issues and showed them that Roma NGOs have a crucial role to empower young Roma to take initiatives.

### 2. **Challenges to Roma youth's motivation to participate**

Participants identified different factors that influence the motivation of young Roma to participate.

Most of the Roma youth who consider themselves activists shared that they got inspired by other Roma activists, their family members or someone from the community. They were influenced and intrigued by the efforts, events and positive results of others' work, which made them join the movement.

For most of the participants of the focus groups, the lack of motivation young Roma people exhibit when it comes to contributing to their society, is highly related to the time they have available, their resources, individual situation, but also specific participation skills. Participants in the focus group stated that for many young Roma participation is not even a concern because they are preoccupied with making a daily living.

Some of them pointed out that their motivation for participation was driven by the antigypsyism and the discrimination they have encountered in school or in society in general. Based on the focus groups conducted it was revealed that the lack of knowledge about opportunities for participation and adequate resources are key aspects influencing Roma youth's motivation for participation. Similarly, Roma youth stated that they feel insecure in the skills they have (i.e., the fear of public appearance and public speaking) which further hinders their motivation to participate.

### **3. Roma community as a barrier to Roma youth activism and participation**

An important factor influencing activism and participation is the position of Roma youth within the broader Roma movement. According to some participants both the elderly generation and the negative social attitudes of the community at large towards young Roma discourage young Roma people's activism. Roma youth, especially young women, are in a lower power position when compared to Roma community leaders, which results in their low self-confidence. Roma youth pointed out that they cannot reach their full potential because of the older generation which does not allow them, especially women, to come to the front and express themselves.

In some conservative communities, young Roma are discouraged from joining social movements or initiating change. This is a result of the distrust and skepticism Roma youth face from their communities, who question the intentions behind Roma youth's motivation in the absence of financial gains.

### **4. Deficiencies of Roma and pro-Roma NGOs**

Roma NGOs have the most important role in fostering Roma youth activism. In the past few years NGOs have compensated to some extent for the lack of Roma representation, have contributed to improving the situation of Roma much more than political institutions or the state, and have proven irreplaceable in empowering young Roma to take initiatives. Despite these positive developments, the Roma youth surveyed in this research pointed out that Roma NGO leaders may pose significant challenges for Roma youth participation. While in some countries Roma NGOs see Roma youth as competitors (i.e., Ukraine), in other countries Roma NGOs are very supportive towards Roma youth (i.e., Romania, Serbia).

Participants thought that NGOs have an important role in raising awareness among Roma youth and in mobilizing them around various issues. However, Roma youth consider that NGOs are not doing enough to outreach young Roma and spread the information about the different opportunities they might have for participation. Being familiar with the work of these NGOs, Roma youth claimed that Roma NGO leadership is sometimes incompetent, that it does not tackle Roma issues proactively, and sidelines the voices of Roma youth, resulting in the emergence of specifically Roma youth NGOs.

The absence of leadership among Roma associations and Roma youth, as well as the perceived monopoly of some civil society organizations on Roma issues, are seen as core barriers to participation and representation. Participants argued that some well-known pro-Roma organizations which are considered to represent the Roma at the national and European levels, get significant financial support to further Roma and Roma youth interests, yet this is not happening in practice (i.e., Spain, Hungary).

## 5. Lack of representation of young Roma in mainstream structures

Some participants said that there is a need for a mainstreaming approach so that young Roma can participate in activities that are not only related to Roma issues. There is a need for youth organizations to include the voices of young Roma. However, respondents noted that young Roma do not participate in the work of the youth sector in their countries because they are not invited or are not recognized, and this results in positioning Roma youth as having a passive role within the mainstream youth movement.

## 6. Lack of institutional support for Roma youth activities

While strong Roma civic representation structures are important, participants also believe that public institutions and governments are ultimately responsible for inclusion and participation of Roma and Roma youth, and without their support most of their efforts are in vain. Focus group participants stated that state institutions should listen to and consider the concerns of Roma and Roma youth because this will allow those in power to respond meaningfully to their issues and concerns.

The discussion with participants highlighted the pessimism that exists among youth when it comes to trust in politicians and institutions. Participants stressed that mainstream institutions are tone-deaf to Roma and Roma youth problems. On the political level, Roma youth are not satisfied with their representation. Roma youth pointed out that institutions should reach out to young Roma and support their contribution and active involvement in the design and implementation of different strategies or action plans related to Roma and young people.

## 7. Antigypsyism as the main barrier in participation

Structural antigypsyism is another important challenge impeding participation of Roma youth on all levels. Antigypsyism is reflected in how local authorities, civil society organizations and policymakers deal with Roma issues. This is manifested in how they perceive the Roma, how much they are willing to listen to Roma voices, and to include Roma as equal partners in different actions and measures. For example, some youth movements are posing implicit barriers for Roma youth not to be represented in their structures (i.e., Spain, Romania), with most of them being rather ignorant and unwilling to include Roma youth.

Participants shared their own experiences of antigypsyism when approaching public institutions. While some were being told to go out because they were “*Gypsies*”, other participants shared how the public institution they work for tried to silence them when discussing Roma problems.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above conclusions, focus group participants put forward a list of recommendations that could empower Roma youth to become publicly active and engaged:

### 1. Raising awareness of young Roma about Roma activism and opportunities they can access and enhancing their knowledge about Roma youth rights

- Civil society organizations, mentors and public institutions should reach out, recruit and inform Roma youth about the different instruments and opportunities they have available for addressing their needs.
- Raise awareness among Roma youth about the importance of participating in decision-making processes.
- Raise awareness of young Roma about their social rights: programs and monitoring should be implemented to ensure that young Roma enjoy these rights.

### 2. Fostering Roma youth's motivation for participation

- Promote positive role models in order to motivate more Roma young people to participate in civic and political life.
- Develop skills and competences that allow Roma and Roma youth leaders to lead and mentor the younger generations and initiate new activities.
- Strengthen the personal capacities of young Roma by investing in young Roma leaders, their skills and technical knowledge, so that they can become professionals and advance the interests of the community.
- Provide support (financial, professional, technical etc.) for Roma youth self-initiatives.

### 3. Addressing the divisions within the Roma community as a barrier for Roma youth activism and participation

- Increase the cooperation among all generations of Roma activists to hand over knowledge and power between generations of Roma activists so that young Roma people have an equal say in matters that affect them.
- Empower Roma girls and women and increase their representation at all levels.



#### **4. Fostering cooperation between Roma and non-Roma individuals and organizations**

- Promote successful cooperation between young people from different ethnic groups through youth exchanges.
- Strengthen the capacity of existing leadership both within the Roma and Roma youth movement in order to participate in civic and political life.
- Civil society organizations working on Roma and youth issues should be more inclusive towards Roma youth participation and representation.
- Formal youth representation structures such as youth associations, school/student councils should engage more with young Roma and include them equally in their structures.
- Ensure adequate resources and sustainability for Roma youth organizations so that they are able to participate in mainstream structures and partner with mainstream organizations.

#### **5. The need for institutional support for Roma youth activities**

- Implement specific measures aimed at increasing the number of young Roma in politics and in different areas and levels of public administration.
- Institutions at the local, national and European level need to create spaces for participation for young Roma, and to include the voices of Roma when it comes to designing activities for young people.
- The state (government) should support the establishment and the operation of more organisations specialized in fostering Roma youth participation.
- Create a safe environment and act together on behalf of Roma youth through the creation of Young Roma Ambassadors (at the national level) whose main role would be to outreach, inspire and inform young Roma across the country.
- Create Roma youth structures such as Roma Youth Councils to represent Roma youth interests and make Roma youth less dependent on mainstream youth or Roma organizations.
- European, national and local Roma inclusion policies must take into account the needs and circumstances of young Roma girls and women and have a gender and child sensitive approach.

#### **6. Tackling Antigypsyism**

- Recognize antigypsyism and promote strong non-discrimination approach in Roma inclusion interventions in all areas.
- Run campaigns targeting the majority to combat the discrimination of Roma and to promote Roma in a positive way.
- Eliminate school segregation: make efforts to reduce the number of school dropouts and ensure that all Roma children and youth complete secondary education.

## Guidelines - Focus groups with young Roma

### Partner organization

Every partner organization should appoint a coordinator in charge of the focus group and/or a moderator to run the discussion.

### Profile of the participants

The focus groups should include 5-max 7 young people. The participants should be defined by each partner organization -according to the partner organization' interests and needs- keeping in mind the principle of *“diversity within diversity”* but corresponding to the age cohort of up to 35 years old (i.e., employed, students, not in education employment or training, equal ratio of male/female, diverse level of education).

### Face to face or online

Due to the current pandemic traveling for research purposes and bringing small groups together can put our health at risk. Partner organizations are suggested to decide whether they would like to conduct the focus groups discussion online or face to face. If you decide to run it online, Phiren Amenca can support you with hosting the online meeting via zoom.

### Language

Every partner organization can decide if the native language/ country of origins language is more appropriate for conducting the focus group discussion.

### Taking notes

Regardless io the language the discussion is conducted in, every focus group should have as a final output a summary of the discussion and detailed notes in English, or if not possible in the language the focus group was conducted.

In order to be sure no material will be lost (i.e., might not save recording, etc.) we would like to ask you to ensure there is a second person besides the one conducting the focus group, which is taking notes as the discussion unfolds. It does not have to be a word-by-word transcription but whatever can be put down while people talk. The reporting template should look along these lines:

■ **Number of participants:**

■ **A list of names with occupation and age:**

■ *John, student, 28 years old*

## Notes

Following the focus group structure try to write down who said what:

- e.g., John, student, 28 years old: „*My main point is that the work structures of most NGOs need to be changed in order to be able to attract "those" young Roma who would be really helpful to their community.*”

## Recording and photos

For accuracy reasons we would like to have the focus group discussions recorded (audio) and documented as much as possible (i.e., photos, screenshots, snapshots).

## Time

The focus groups should be about 40 minutes

### Possible materials needed:

- Recording device
- Supporting slides with the main aim of the Roma youth voice project, the role of the focus group

## Focus group structure

The focus group will be divided in the following parts:

### 1. Prior:

- Send an email to participants explaining the aim of the research and of the focus group
- Ask them to think about the following: What does civic and political engagement/participation means for you personally as a young Roma?

### 2. Introductions

#### ASK PARTICIPANTS FOR RECORDING PERMISSION

- Explain the aim of the focus group
  - Through its project "Roma Youth Voices" Phiren Amenca embarked on a research project aiming to explore the needs, concerns of Roma youth (from the EU), but also their challenges and opportunities for civic and political participation.
  - As a partner organization in this research project, I invited you for a discussion on your own experiences with Roma youth activism.
  - The results of this research will be shared with you, the European and national level stakeholders, and other Roma and youth stakeholders.
  - The moderator's role is to guide the discussion by asking participants to reflect on specific questions
  - Inform them that the session will conclude in 40 minutes

- Short round of introduction from participants if needed (city, age, occupation, etc.)
- Rules of listening and speaking (*not mandatory but as guiding principles*)
  - It's all right to abstain from discussing specific topics if you are not comfortable.
  - All responses are valid - there are no right or wrong answers.
  - Please respect the opinions of others even if you don't agree.
  - Try to stay on topic; we may need to interrupt so that we can cover all the material.
  - Help protect others' privacy by not discussing details outside the group
  - Something else?
- Guide for the moderator
  - *Can you say more about...*
  - *Who else has something to say*
  - *These are important and interesting points. However, we need to bring the discussion back to our main focus...*

### 3. Activity “Getting to know each other”

- Before we start the discussion, I would like to propose to you the *“I agree - I disagree”* game I have some statements and you have to say if you agree or disagree, and then I will **ask some of you to share your answer choice and say more details about it.**
- I will start with the first statement:
  - 1 I grew up in a Roma activists family
  - 2 I consider myself a young Roma activist
  - 3 Most of the Roma youth do not know, are not aware that there is a Roma movement in their country/ region
  - 4 Most Roma youth activists are educated or have high levels of formal education
  - 5 I started activism because I got inspired from other youth activists – *Follow up why they started?*
  - 6 I do not feel represented by the current Roma youth leaders nor in my country nor at the European level.

### 4. Activity “defining participation”

*What does civic and political engagement/participation mean for you personally?*

## 5. Activity “why do we care?”

- Why is it important to discuss the topic of **youth** in general people’s civic and political engagement?
- Why is it important to discuss the topic of **Roma youth** civic and political engagement?
  - How young Roma people can benefit from European or national policies/principles/guidelines targeting the participation of Roma youth? Would that be a useful tool?

## 6. A set of questions

- Needs and Challenges
  - What are the specific challenges or barriers that young Roma activists face, especially when defending Roma rights, mobilizing communities or acting on behalf of other Roma?
- Recommendations
  - Who do you think should be doing what to help Roma youth get publicly active and engaged?

## 7. Closing

Thank the participants!

Stay in touch via the Roma Youth Voices Facebook page to follow updates



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**The research was lead by Simona Torotcoi PhD.**

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